

Indumentum

Newsletter of the Vancouver Rhododendron Society

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The
Vancouver Rhododendron Society
is a chapter of the
American Rhododendron Society

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This Month's Meeting: Thursday, January 15th
7:30 pm, Floral Hall, VanDusen Botanical Garden
Program: Members' Slides
Annual General Meeting and Election of Officers

Plants in Bloom - *Chimonanthus praecox* (winter sweet)

Winter sweet is as much a Jekyll and Hyde plant as one could probably find. The species is known almost exclusively for its penetrating, spicily sweet aroma—a welcome feature in a garden at any time—but in the dreary, sodden Vancouver winter, the fragrance is a definite spirit-lifter. Younger plants produce flowers reliably, given half shade and a moist, well-drained position. With age, these are produced with increasing bounty; however, they are borne on exceptionally difficult branches (this is the Mr. Hyde part). Note in the image below how the twigs diverge at near right angles. On a small plant, this results in merely a twiggy little bush. Over time, however, each of these squarrose shoots becomes its own sturdy stem, with its own retinue of stiffly opposite twigs and twiglets—thus creating a garden-shed-sized monster. If you didn't plant it toward the back of the bed, out of eye-poking, sweater-pulling range, look out.

While too many garden writers (probably poets, too) have extolled the heady perfume that emanates from the flowers, I doubt many have looked so favourably on their physicality. Waxy and seemingly drained of colour, they are perhaps fascinating only in their oddness. Without their extraordinary olifactory character, the flowers might be dismissed for windblown bits of rainsoaked paper.

...continued on page 3



Chimonanthus praecox var. *luteus*
Photo: UBC Botanical Garden

President's Message

Now that Christmas and New Years have passed, I'm getting anxious to see the first very early-flowering rhododendrons in bloom in my garden.

Unfortunately, the icy winter winds blowing off Hotel Lake delay blooming of even my *R. dauricum* until February. For now I have to be content with enjoying brightly coloured buds on rhododendrons such as 'Taurus', and gold and maroon foliage on various dwarfs.

However, I would guess that many of you have rhododendrons in full bloom right now. Since I'm often asked by novice rhododendron collectors for names of these type of plants, I'll be requesting veteran VRS members at the January meeting to tell us which very early-blooming rhododendrons they would recommend.

Also at our first meeting of 2004, in addition to a short AGM, we will be featuring member slides, but with a difference. We want to highlight photos of gardens created by our own VRS members, both home-owners and professionals, emphasizing rhododendrons and companion perennial plants. If you would like to show 20 or fewer slides of your garden as part of that programme, please contact me by January 7th (604 929 5670).

And speaking of very, very, very early-blooming rhodos, last fall I received a phone call from an avid gardener in Gibsons. She asked if the Vancouver Rhododendron Society could help her to identify a mature rhododendron that consistently bloomed in late September and at no other time during the year. I had trouble believing that she wasn't referring to a



plant with a few off-season blooms, but she insisted I come and see her rhododendron in full bloom.

I arrived at her garden in the first week of October. Sure enough, the rhododendron was covered with flowers. It was a mature, metre-high plant with an open growth habit and leaves and flowers very much the size and colour of those on Ginny Gee. I had never seen anything like this plant, but assured the gardener I would get back to her after consulting with members of the VRS.

The photo above shows her rhododendron. If you can identify it, please contact me, and I know she will be delighted.

Happy New Year.

Ron Knight

To advertise in *Indumentum*, contact **Tony Clayton** Tel: 604 921 7947 tclayton@telus.net

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VRS + ARS Membership	\$50.00
(US & Overseas)	\$US 28.00
VRS Membership	\$25.00
(no ARS Quarterly Journal)	
Associate Membership	\$10.00
(member of another ARS Chapter in Canada)	
Associate Membership	\$US 10.00
(member of another ARS Chapter outside of Canada)	

Advertising Rates

	1 month	3 months	8 months
Business card	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$50.00
$\frac{1}{4}$ page	\$25.00	\$67.50	\$160.00
$\frac{1}{2}$ page	\$40.00	\$108.00	\$256.00
full page	\$70.00	\$189.00	\$448.00

Plants in Bloom continued from page 1

The species is early to flower, sometimes opening a tentative few buds in December, and generally flowering in earnest in January and February (the name *Chimonanthus praecox* means early snow flower). Two named forms are sometimes available: the soft yellow var. *luteus* (pictured on page 1) and the larger flowered 'Grandiflorus', which has deeper yellow petals and a dark red stain in the centre of the flower (most plants in gardens resemble this cultivar).

Given room, winter sweet will grow to 5m tall or more, and nearly as wide. It can be a handsome brute in the right position, and it wears its large, elliptic leaves well—they are seldom attacked by pests. In autumn, some of the leaves turn a clear yellow before falling, and this might be considered the shrub's best ornamental feature. Oh, but the scent of those flowers—even perhaps the anticipation of the fragrance wafting through the garden—is enough for me to put up with Mr. Hyde.

Douglas Justice

Book Review

Trees of Britain and Northern Europe, David More and John White, 2003, Cassells Publishing, (Timber Press in Canada and the USA).

Weighing in at 2kg, with a matching price of about CDN\$125, this is a book to be reckoned with. Its great merit is the excellence of the illustrations. Botanical artist David More has painted 1800 tree species and cultivars from life, a labour of love that took 10 years. The paintings are of tree (form), leaf, flower, fruit and bark, and constitute an outstanding aid to identification.



John White has written a short informative account for each species and cultivar. With respect to taxonomy, he chooses the

classification and nomenclature recognized 10 or more years ago rather than generally accepted current usage. This may be all right for the reader familiar with both "old" and "new," but the reader just learning to place genera by family and memorize names will be misled and ultimately confused. The text contains a number of questionable statements, evidence of gremlin activity, and there are a few clear errors of fact, such as the reference to *Stewartia malacodendron* as a Japanese species.

However, the illustrations are truly wonderful. Do take some time to look at the book in library or bookstore.

Alan R. Turner



Chimonanthus praecox 'Grandiflorus'
Photo: UBC Botanical Garden

Program Notes

John Simmons (our April speaker) will unfortunately not be able to be with us because of health problems in his family. We are disappointed, and hope he will be able to come in the near future.

Meanwhile, our speaker for that evening will be **Hugh Angus**, Curator of Westonbirt Arboretum, in England. It was my intention to invite Hugh for next year anyway, so the change really represents only a shift in timing. A word about him can be found, as usual, on the website.

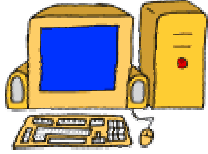
Joe Ronsley



✧ **Contributions to the Raffle Table** help offset the rental of the Floral Hall. Plants, books, fresh eggs, etc. are always welcome.

✧ **For the Refreshment Table**, donations of cookies, cakes, cheese, and other snacks are greatly appreciated.

Have you seen the VRS website? Go to <http://www.rhodo.citymax.com/> to see up-to-date news, views and more!



The ARS website, <http://www.rhododendron.org/> has news with a more international flavour.

plants in North America.” I have a few copies of catalogues to bring to our Thursday meetings for your perusal. If there is sufficient interest, I will arrange to register with Whitecap, and provide them with a multiple order, which will probably be shipped free of charge. A small markup will help to bolster our own VRS account!

Louis Peterson 604 921 7260 lpeterso@sfu.ca

News and Notes

VRS secretary and webmaster **Bill Spohn** sent in the following communiqué:

Exhortation to Exportation

As a member who is still engaged in the acquisition (my wife would use the adjective ‘compulsive’) of species rhododendrons, I have been dutifully setting out before dawn twice a year to pick up plants at the Rhododendron Species Foundation in Federal Way Washington, paying the \$25 for the phytosanitary certificate and a couple of tanks of gas, and learning to smile at the border when the customs people share a laugh at the amount on the bill—sometimes trying to convince them that I am not a commercial gardener, and that I just...well, look at them, I don’t sell them.

I understand that many members choose not to subject themselves to this ordeal, but thanks to Joe Ronsley, now a member on the board of the RSF, you have an alternative. Not only can you avoid all the paperwork, and paying for a plant inspection, but you can now have the plants delivered to UBC for you. It wasn’t worthwhile buying just one or two plants and going through all the fuss and expense the old way, but now the only expense is a CDN\$10 fee to cover gas, truck rental and such, and the only fuss will be explaining to your significant other why you needed that *many* new plants.

The trial run will take place with the spring release, for which orders have already been placed, but in the future the executive plan to make this option available more widely, so that members may purchase the plants they would like with minimal bother.

Books on Gardening

For those of our members interested in purchasing books on gardening and garden plants at substantially discounted prices, Whitecap Books offers up to 50% saving on books ordered on a non-return basis by organizations such as our VRS.

The Whitecap catalogue (which has many categories in addition to gardening) is accessible on-line at <http://www.whitecap.ca>, and Whitecap is the Canadian distributor for Timber Press, another comprehensive “publisher of sophisticated books on garden



The Shinto shrine at Kameido in the falling snow
Detail of a woodblock print ca. 1833-1834, by Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858)

VRS Executive Nominations - 2003 - 2004

President	Ron Knight*
Past President	Gerry Gibbens [§]
Vice President	Louis Peterson*
Secretary	Bill Spohn*
Treasurer	Barbara Sherman*
Membership	Carole Conlin*
Newsletter	Douglas and Karen Justice*
Programme	Joe Ronsley*
Director (3 years)	Lothar Mischke
Director (2 years)	Bill Herbst [§]
Director (1 year)	Todd Major [§]

* Incumbent

[§] Ratification not needed

November Education - Pollination: Plant Procreation & the Blessings of Bees



In the Education Session of our November meeting, **Claudia Ratti**, who is a Masters student at SFU, gave us a whirlwind tour of aspects of pollination that touched upon botany, biology, evolution, ecology, crop production and protection, pest control, garden choices and much more. [Bee images by [M.C. Cassino](#) are used by permission.]

Claudia's fascinating account of the wonderful complexities of Nature prompted me to try to learn more about topics that we (I) take for granted, but about which I know so little (dabbling on the internet and into encyclopaedias shows, to me, the wonderful and intricate complexities of the world around us). It is estimated that at least 80% of the food we eat, whether plant or animal based, depends at some early stage on the primary intervention of pollination.

The coal-based fossil fuels, one of our main energy sources, are derived from ancient plants belonging to the Carboniferous period of 300-million years ago, a time (geologists tell us) that included procreation via the very early forms of pollination (probably wind

blown) as well as the spore-based reproduction dominant in that period. The oldest fossil remains of flying insects are at the minus 130 million year mark, with bees much later at minus 40 million years, and pollens at minus 120 million years, a testament to the enduring integrity of the latter in a world of constant change and decay.

Our hominid cousins came out of the bushes only six million years ago. Of the approximately 800,000 species extant in the insect kingdom, it is said that some 20,000 species are bees, the supreme actors of pollination activity. There must be millions of them out there, working on our behalf as well as their own! Bees belong to the third largest insect order, together with wasps and ants. The bees are vegetarian while the others are omnivorous, keeping the earth's insect population in check. Claudia began by explaining a few things about plants and how they reproduce.

The simplest are the algae, followed by the ferns and their cousins, all of which produce tiny, genetically complete spores (asexual reproduction).

Next in the hierarchy are the sexual reproducers, the gymnosperms (cone bearing plants), followed by angiosperms (flowering plants) at the top of ecological development.

These latter two classes produce pollens that contain half of the required genetic blueprint, the other half residing in the (female) ovules.

Plants are able to do what we cannot do, by manufacturing their own food via photosynthesis, and by retaining some cells in an embryonic state, a benefit that permits us to take cuttings and do grafting. Some reproduce asexually above ground (by stolons) or below ground (by rhizomes) runners, or via tubers, bulbs or budding. The offspring are clones of, and hence genetically identical to, the parent. The majority of plant species are the flowering, seed producing sexual reproducers, with highly developed "male-like" functions (anthers and pollen) and "female" functions (stigma, ovaries and ovules). The species in this category are enormously varied, have great genetic diversity, and stronger ecological resilience and adaptability. In simplistic terms, pollination involves the union of microscopic pollen particles (male) and



female ovules, either in or from flowers on the same plant (self pollination), or from flowers from different plants (cross pollination). The two "sexes" (pollen and ovules) may occur in the same flower, in different flowers on the same plant, or in different flowers on different plants.

... continued on page 6

... from page 5

The two components must come together for fruiting and seed production to occur. Cross-pollination has the advantage of increasing genetic diversity. Insects and wind are the chief external agents in pollination; birds and bats are significant, while rodents and water play minor roles. Wind disperses the pollen of grasses, many kinds of trees (and the asexual spores of fern-related species). Among insects, the bees, ranging in size from 3-5 mm to the ample bumblebee and the very large queens, are the main players.

North America has about 4000 species, some 10-20% of the known world species.

A large number inhabit our own Fraser Valley. Most bee species are solitary, the exceptions being the honeybee (very large colonies, 50,000 to 200,000 inhabitants) and the bumblebee (only 20 to 1000 per colony). Flowering plants use a number of ruses to control the insects that will attend to their pollination needs, including season and time of flowering, nectar, odour (bad smells as well as good scents), timing of odour release, and accessibility to the flower and the nectar source. Bees possess extremely sensitive antennae that detect the chemicals of smells, including the volatile pheromones that are wafted in tiny concentrations upon the breeze, to guide them to a food source or to a mate.

Many have compound eyes that are tuned to a specific region of the spectrum, not detecting reds but sensitive to yellows, blues and the ultraviolet range that is beyond our range of vision.

Butterflies and birds see reds and orange, while moths and bats (the night flyers) prefer light colours.

Flowers that open at night, especially tropical ones, have particularly strong scents that attract the night flyers. Some insects have short tongues; others have long ones, appropriate to the flower that they specifically frequent. Some set out to find nectar, while the purpose of

others is solely to actively collect pollen, often from flowers that do not produce nectar (e.g., poppies). In all cases, some pollen is adventitiously transferred from flower to flower during the "working" period, while some or most is brought back to the hive on the scopa ("fur") or in special pollen sacs of the insect. The pollen is either placed in food storage compartments, or given immediately to a clutch of eggs or larvae.

Only the honeybee thinks of us and converts nectar into honey for our use! The health and vigour of the bee population is of extreme importance to agriculture, as well as to gardeners.

Unfortunately, the use of pesticides and herbicides not only deters visits by the bees, but also is lethal to many other

beneficial species.

Parasites of various kinds compromise the lives of many bees, the varroa mite that decimates honeybee hives being particularly well known. Different species of insects have fascinating chemical "languages."

Life cycles are complex and often precarious. These topics, and the extraordinary caste organization and social behaviour of the honeybee in particular, are among the many Wonders of Nature, chapters for another time! With thanks to Claudia for assistance in writing this story. Errors, oversimplifications and misinterpretations are mine, not Claudia's.

Louis K. Peterson



Rhododendron iriei

Painted by Lillian Snelling, 1925
for Curtis's Botanical Magazine (did not appear)